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SIPDIS

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FOR NEA/FO (GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS);
ALSO FOR NSC

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SUBJECT: BEN ALI REPORTEDLY APPROVES DISCUSSIONS ON GOOD
GOVERNANCE/POLITICAL REFORM: A POSSIBLE POLITICAL OPENING?

REF: A. TUNIS 869
1B. TUNIS 698

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) According to the Dutch Ambassador in Tunis, President Ben Ali has approved quiet discussions with the UNDP and Dutch Embassy on possible steps to increase political freedom and improve governance in Tunisia. The Dutch Ambassador, Rita Dulci Rahman, briefed Ambassador Godec and French Ambassador Degallaix on the initiative on October 3. Rahman, who is working on the project with Sadok Chaabane, President of the GOT's Economic and Social Council, said the discussions might include measures that would help to "level the playing field" for opposition parties in advance of the 2009 elections. The discussions, which are at a very early stage, reportedly grow out of a Dutch paper on governance that lays out possible steps, including a "participatory process of stock-taking and mapping of Tunisian views" about sustainable democracy; the holding in Tunis in 2008 of a high-level conference on good governance, to include participation of international experts; and the creation of a Sustainable Democracy Committee that would include GOT officials and civil society representatives, which would be responsible for making follow-up recommendations on democratic institution-building. An initial round of training for GOT officials on improving governance, based on the ideas in the paper, was reportedly done at the Oslo Center for Good Governance. It may be followed up. Rahman intends to propose to the Tunisians that the United States and France also join the work. End Summary.

A Possible Opening?

12. (C) For the past several months, the Dutch Embassy in Tunis has quietly been working in partnership with UNDP to promote political and economic reforms, using international good governance indicators as a vehicle. Dutch Ambassador Rita Dulci Rahman, together with UN Resident Coordinator (and UNDP head) Heba Kholy began this process by engaging in a series of discussions with GOT counterparts about various governance projects the UNDP has supported in other Arab countries. These discussions succeeded in piquing the interest of a small group of pro-reform officials, including Sadok Chaabane and Prime Ministry officials, who expressed interest in possible applications of lessons learned from

elsewhere in the Arab world. (Note: A small office in the Prime Ministry is responsible for overall government reform efforts. Its mandate includes increasing government efficiency and improving the GOT's scores in various international indices. End Note.) A small group of GOT officials participated in a training program on governance indicators held earlier this year at the Oslo Center for Good Governance. The Dutch Embassy funded their participation via the UNDP. The Dutch and UNDP also plan further training at the Oslo Center.

Ben Ali Reportedly On Board

¶3. (C) The Dutch Ambassador briefed Ambassador Godec and French Ambassador Degallaix on October 3. Rahman said that she had provided Sadok Chaabane, President of the Economic and Social Council (who is also a former Minister of Justice, Minister of Higher Education, and Director of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies), with a copy of a Dutch authored paper on governance and democracy in Tunisia. Chaabane later told Rahman that President Ben Ali had read the paper and was very interested in its proposals. Rahman said she has also begun speaking with Chaabane and others about very specific reforms that should be undertaken in advance of the 2009 elections, including the creation of an independent electoral commission and ensuring fair access to media for opposition parties. Rahman noted that Ben Ali, according to Chaabane, had expressed a specific interest in guaranteed media time for opposition political parties.

¶4. (C) The Dutch paper lays out other possible next steps, including a "participatory process of stock-taking and mapping of Tunisian views" about sustainable democracy; the

holding in Tunis in 2008 of a high-level conference on good governance, to include participation of regional and international experts; and the creation of a Sustainable Democracy Committee that would include GOT officials and civil society representatives. Among other things, this committee would be mandated with developing recommendations on democratic institution-building.

¶5. (C) After further discussions, Ben Ali approved Chaabane's engaging in further discussions with the UNDP and the Dutch on specific proposals. Chaabane's participation, however, is to be in his "private capacity." Ben Ali also asked Chaabane to report back to him directly on the initiative's progress. The Dutch Ambassador said she would ask Chaabane whether the GOT would welcome the participation of the US and French Embassies in this initiative. We discussed the possibility of American and/or European institutions providing technical support for reforms. Both the French and US Ambassadors believed that it would be possible to find ways to pay for this effort.

Comment

¶6. (C) We support this initiative, which is in line with our strategy of encouraging political reform in Tunisia. The fact that Ben Ali has given Chaabane a green light for discussions appears positive. Chaabane is a very senior GOT figure and ruling party stalwart, with considerable access. Moreover, Ben Ali's own comments in recent months (e.g., to CODEL Tanner) indicate that he genuinely wants to see stronger opposition parties. Nevertheless, there is certain to be strong resistance in some quarters in the GOT. There has been little evidence, so far, of a genuine GOT interest in leveling the political playing field, as demonstrated by the continuing efforts to evict the main serious opposition party from its headquarters and several branch offices. While we are hopeful this initiative may lead to further progress, we should not be excessively optimistic. There are many possible outcomes for this process, some of which would not be particularly positive. Nevertheless, we have made

clear to both the Dutch Embassy and UNDP colleagues that we are prepared to be of assistance in any way we can, with or without an American "face." We will do all we can to encourage this initiative. It is too early to call this a political opening. It is, rather, a small thread that we should follow to its conclusion. End Comment.

GODEC